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NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

TO DERIVE SPECIAL ADVANTAGES:

CLAUSEWITZ'S THEORY OF TIME

AND THE PERSIAN GULF WAR

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As in many other areas of our lives, our ideas about warfare are generally formed unreflectively, resting largely on unquestioned assumptions. Sometimes these concepts are well-suited to the situation, but history is replete with examples of individuals "fighting the last war" because of an inability to understand how current circumstances differed from their past experiences. Insight into various theories on warfare will not solve this problem by providing easy answers, but in helping to formulate the right questions. As Sir Julian Corbett explains, theory should help an individual "acquire a broad outlook whereby he may be the surer his plan shall cover all the ground, and whereby he may with greater rapidity and certainty seize all the factors of a sudden situation."¹

A factor that is fundamental to developing an effective strategy is the impact that time will have in a particular conflict. According to the Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz, "both belligerents need time, the question is only which of the two can expect to derive special advantages from it in light of his own situation."² The clarity and depth of Clausewitz's analysis on the impact of time in war is one reason his theory has remained so relevant. Developing a better appreciation of time as a factor in war can be done by examining Clausewitz's ideas on this subject and then comparing his ideas with the actions of the United States in the Persian Gulf war.

The implications of Clausewitz's theory on the nature of time in war are best analyzed by breaking them down into offense and defense. His main thrust is that time

¹ Julian S. Corbett, Some Principles of Maritime Strategy (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911, reprint ed. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1988), p. 4.

² Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 597, in all quotes the emphasis is in the original.

favors the defense "time which is allowed to pass unused accumulates to the credit of the defender. He reaps where he did not sow. Any omission of attack--whether from bad judgment, fear, or indolence--accrues to the defender's benefit."³ This unused accumulation of time is frequently overlooked, but is key to comprehending why Clausewitz considers the defense the stronger form of war. In all cases, and at every level of war, from the global strategic level to the smallest tactical battle, unless the attacker does something to change the situation, the defender "wins" simply by maintaining the status quo.

Clausewitz believed that the defense also offered other advantages that increased over time. If the defending army could delay the enemy's advance, the time lost to the attacker would assist the defender in reversing the situation. During this delay the militia could be mobilized and used to increase the numerical strength of the defense, changing the relative balance of the fighting forces. Additionally the "collective influence of the country's inhabitants"⁴ exhibited either through passive or active resistance, would further diminish the attack by draining off manpower to guard the newly conquered territory. Finally, with more time a defender's allies will enter the fray and, "as a rule the defender can count on outside assistance more than can the attacker."⁵ In this regard Clausewitz preaches patience, counseling that given time the defender could count on changes in the political situation, such as the addition of allies to their side or the loss of allies to the

³ Ibid , p 357

⁴ Ibid , p 373

⁵ Ibid , p 376

attacker⁶ He felt certain that these changes would occur out of psychological reasons such as envy, jealousy, anxiety, and fear over the actions of the attacking nation⁷

Collectively these factors would gradually change the relative strengths of the offense and defense While the attacker would in all likelihood begin as the stronger force, over time this strength would diminish as the defender's grew The defender could not just rely on time alone however To take advantage of time it was necessary to correctly analyze the situation and then take action that allowed the strategist to derive "special advantages" from the circumstances The defending army must slow the advance of the attacker (without losing the cohesion of their own units) while the government took the political steps enumerated above

Because Clausewitz viewed war as a duality he concluded that the offense must control the tempo to make the best use of time In writing about offensive war he cautioned, "no conquest can be carried out too quickly, and that to spread it over a longer period than the minimum needed to complete makes it not less difficult, but more"⁸

While many of the measures enumerated apply to the strategic benefits derived from gaining time, on an operational or tactical level time can also be used to the defender's advantage Because the attacker generally has the initiative regarding the time and place of an attack, the defender's initial task is to reduce the momentum of the blow, allowing reinforcements to arrive, forcing the offense to lose the initiative and react to the defense At the tactical and operational levels a swift attack has other benefits as well "The faster [the attacker's] pace the greater the speed with which events will run along

⁶ Ibid , p 613

⁷ Ibid , p 597

⁸ Ibid , p 598

their predetermined course this is the primary area where psychological forces will increase and multiply without being rigidly bound to the weights and measures of the material world "⁹ Fighting at a faster pace than the defender anticipates or can react to causes the enemy to break mentally even before the physical defeat and results in an outcome disproportionate to the physical effort In short, a faster pace works to the advantage of the attacker while, because of the equal distribution of time, a slower pace favors the defender

Clausewitz's ideas on time in war match very closely with the experience of the United States in the Persian Gulf war, particularly during the period leading up to the war in January 1991 One reason the United States enjoyed such great success during this period was that American policymakers understood the implications of time while Saddam Hussein did not The war began with the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq on August 2, 1991, a move that shocked both American policymakers and other world leaders Although the long-term objective of the United States was to eject Saddam from Kuwait, the immediate aim was to defend Saudi Arabia against an invasion After the Saudi king agreed to the deployment of American forces, President Bush spelled out this goal by telling the American people that the troops were being sent to "assist the Saudi Arabian government in the defense of its homeland "¹⁰

The naked aggression of Iraq and the defensive response of the United States clearly framed Saddam Hussein as the aggressor While there was no military defense of Kuwait, shortly afterwards many of Clausewitz's predictions about the value of time for

⁹ Ibid , p 470

¹⁰ U S News and World Report, Triumph Without Victory The History of the Persian Gulf War (New York Times Books, 1993), p 93

the defender rang true. Aided by President Bush's skill at personal diplomacy and Secretary of State James Baker's tireless efforts, an impressive international coalition was soon arrayed against Iraq. In New York the United Nation's Security Council quickly passed resolutions condemning the invasion of Kuwait and slapped an economic embargo on Iraq. In late August another Security Council resolution allowed allied naval forces to stop and search Iraqi vessels. Secretary Baker flew to Moscow and produced a joint statement with the Soviet Union that supported the U.S. goals -- a development that would have been unheard of just a few years before. Turkey quickly allied itself with the United States, as did the rest of the NATO allies. Perhaps the most surprising development was the support given by the Arab nations. The actions and attitude of Saddam and other Iraqi officials incensed other leaders in the region, leading to a resolution by the Arab League on August 10, denouncing the Iraqi invasion. In addition to this diplomatic coup, the Allied military coalition soon included Egyptian and Syrian troops, as well as forces from Saudi Arabia.¹¹

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of having the time available to assemble this widespread diplomatic support. The Allied coalition not only added legitimacy to the U.S. efforts, but also arrayed all of the political, financial, and military powers of the world against Iraq, leaving it "without substantial allies -- condemned, scorned, and isolated as perhaps no other country had been in modern history."¹² None of these results happened by themselves. They were skillfully guided by national leaders who understood the political objectives and the instruments of power they had available,

¹¹ Roland Dannreuther, *The Gulf Conflict: A Political and Strategic Analysis* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1992), pp. 23-27, U.S. News, pp. 99-100.

¹² Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), p. 299.

but they were also aided in no small measure by having the time to persuade other nations to act and the foresight to use that factor to their advantage

Iraq's poor decisions also allowed time to accumulate to "the credit of the defender" in other ways, most importantly, the buildup of American forces in Saudi Arabia. Immediately after the invasion of Kuwait, American naval forces started moving toward the area while ground units and land-based air squadrons prepared to deploy as soon as King Fahd gave his permission. Most of the heavy equipment went by sea and would take several weeks to arrive, but air power allowed the United States to overcome the constraints of distance by rapidly bringing large numbers of troops into theater. While these were only light forces, not capable of stopping a full-scale armored assault by the Iraqi army, they served as a warning of the U.S. commitment to Saudi Arabia. Two weeks after the deployment began 35,000 American troops were already in Saudi Arabia and another 20,000 sailors were afloat nearby. The combination of diplomatic support and increasing troop strength led the Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, to tell the President, "the situation was improving each day." Although the number of troops was still too small to offer a formidable defense, Powell felt confident enough to predict that "Saddam will probably not attack now because he had not taken the chance when he really had the upper hand during the first two weeks, when the U.S. forces had been considerably smaller."¹³ The United States had taken advantage of the time available, Saddam had not

¹³ Ibid , pp 284-285

While successful in 1991, Clausewitz's theory contains a warning that seems particularly apt in light of the experience in the Gulf War and the validity of that conflict as a model for future wars. Through his study of war Clausewitz concluded that complex schemes were ill-advised because such arrangements take a great deal of time to carry out. Furthermore, "this time must be available without a counterattack on one of its parts interfering with the development of the whole. If the enemy decides on a simpler attack, one that can be carried out quickly, he will gain the advantage and wreck the grand design."¹⁴ The distance to Saudi Arabia and the inability to base American troops there meant that hundreds of thousands of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines had to be brought to the theater, along with all their equipment. There is no easy way to get around the "complex nature" of this type of operation, but it is important to understand the implications it poses. One can readily estimate the impact of an attack by what Clausewitz termed an "active, courageous and resolute adversary" during this build-up.¹⁵ Such a move could have radically changed both the conduct and outcome of the war.

Fortunately, an attack did not occur and coalition forces grew steadily each day. By late September the earlier fear of an Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia was beginning to fade, replaced by the fear that the United States would lead the coalition into a hasty war. Although removing Iraq from Kuwait remained the coalition's political objective, the method for achieving this aim spanned a wide range of options and included everything from continuing the economic sanctions to full-scale combat. The willingness of President Bush to forcibly free Kuwait caused a shift in the way people defined the crisis,

¹⁴ Clausewitz, p. 228-229

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 229

now the coalition was seen as the offensive force and Saddam was on the defensive. With the exchange of positions the advantage of time changed -- the U S now needed to move quickly.

Many of the challenges Clausewitz mentioned can be seen in the events that took place in the fall of 1990, as fractures appeared in the coalition. Sensing the shift to the offensive, and wary of American leaders guiding the move to war, French President Francois Mitterand made a concerted effort to avoid war and seek a diplomatic solution. He addressed the UN General Assembly on September 24, and proposed discussions on the Iraqi offer that their return of Kuwait be linked to the issue of the Palestinian homeland -- a position that the US soundly rejected.¹⁶ Without the consent or support of the rest of the coalition, the French also initiated behind the scenes negotiations to broker a peaceful solution.¹⁷ France's efforts were echoed by President Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union who also became a spokesman for a diplomatic settlement. He sent Yevgeni Primakov, an Arab specialist, to Baghdad, hoping to capitalize on the long-standing partnership between Iraq and the Soviet Union. Although this effort went nowhere, part of the Gorbachev-Mitterand summit in late October was devoted to gaining support for a diplomatic settlement.

There were also other signs that the delay was beginning to affect international support. Although the European nations were members of the coalition, ministers of the European Union attempted to inject their own political solution for ending the crisis. In addition, a variety of world-wide diplomats flew to Baghdad, including the Secretary

¹⁶ Dannreuther, pp 34, 37

¹⁷ US News, pp 192-193

General of the United Nations, to bring home hostages and convince Saddam not to go to war. The more time elapsed, the more other external events occurred that threatened the U.S. effort. A harbinger of the trouble that might lie ahead came in early October when 17 Palestinians were massacred at the Islamic holy site of the Temple Mount, an incident that threatened to splinter the coalition. President Bush also faced domestic political difficulties as he watched his approval rating drop from above 80 percent in late August to just over 50 percent in early November.¹⁸ Sanctions and diplomatic efforts to end the crisis would take time, a factor that was no longer on the side of the United States. Now on the offensive, the U.S. needed to move quickly and end the crisis or risk solidifying the status quo.

To be sure, there were other pressures as well. There was little hope that the Saudi government would support the sustained presence of large numbers of American forces long enough to broker a political settlement with Saddam. The Islamic holy days of Ramadan in the spring meant large numbers of Muslim pilgrims would be coming to Mecca, increasing the risk of a terrorist attack on coalition forces, as well as diminishing the legitimacy of the Saudi leaders as the guardians of Islam. Likewise, the oppressive summer heat in Saudi Arabia later in the year would have severely hampered military operations, a strong argument for beginning the war sooner rather than later. In the end though, the loss of international support seems to have been the most important factor in tilting the decision to go to war.¹⁹ President Bush and his administration took the steps to build public support, both at home and abroad and on November 29, the UN Security

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 174

¹⁹ Dannreuther, p. 39

Council passed resolution 678 authorizing the use of force to eject Iraq from Kuwait, with a deadline of January 15. December and January were filled with feverish diplomatic efforts to halt the crisis, but it was clear that time was running out for Saddam.

In the actual conduct of the war, the intent was to compress the fighting as much as possible to disorient and confuse the Iraqi defenders. The air campaign plan was deliberately named "Instant Thunder" to contrast its rapidity with the graduated pressure of the "Rolling Thunder" bombing effort against North Vietnam.²⁰ Likewise, the ground scheme of maneuver was designed to outflank the Iraqi army, psychologically dislocating the commanders through an extensive deception campaign involving an amphibious assault.²¹ The results of the military campaign are without dispute -- the allied coalition dominated every aspect of the fighting.

The conduct of the buildup to the Gulf War offers a classic case study in Clausewitz's theory about time in war. On the defense, the United States took advantage of the time available to build a wide-spread diplomatic and military coalition. On the offense, American leaders moved as quickly as possible to keep the advantage. American strategy was not perfect, but policymakers demonstrated a firm understanding of how time was affecting the course of the war. The most important implication we can draw from Clausewitz's theory about time is that time is shared among adversaries in a conflict. It is neither an inherent advantage nor a disadvantage. The strategist must analyze the situation as objectively as possible and determine the value of time for each side, only then is it possible to determine how to derive "special advantages" from the situation.

²⁰ Richard P. Hallion, Storm Over Iraq (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), p. 143.

²¹ U.S. News, pp. 150-172.